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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7328
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1015
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4566
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8106
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5667
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1473
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1426
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000215

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: DISORGANIZATION AND DISUNITY PRECEDE BURMA'S
CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

REF: RANGOON 181

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary: As the regime's planned constitutional referendum draws nearer, the opposition remains disorganized and scattered. Infighting among pro-democracy groups continues, with tension between the NLD's senior leaders, ethnic pro-democracy leaders, and the NLD's younger members coming to a head. The one exception is 88 Generation Students, led by Toe Kyaw Hlaing, who is traveling Burma and working relentlessly to organize monks, NLD Youth, and the frustrated MPs-elect, to coordinate a vote "No" campaign in response to the referendum. Ethnic nationality cease-fire groups are also fractured and disorganized. They are reluctant to take a position on the referendum or announce their strategies until they have thoroughly reviewed the draft constitution, which the regime has yet to release to them. Surprisingly, the regime seems equally disorganized and uncoordinated in mounting their vote "Yes" campaign. End summary.

12. (C) Over the last week, pol/econ officers have met with a broad range of contacts from the NLD, 88 Generation, the ethnic nationalities and cease-fire groups, businessmen, journalists, and ordinary citizens to assess the regime's efforts to promote a "Yes" vote in the upcoming constitutional referendum, and the opposition's efforts to defeat it. As the May referendum draws nearer, the infighting and discord among the pro-democracy opposition appears to be increasing. The opposition's response to the referendum is uncoordinated and disorganized with the exception of 88 Generation Students. Most groups are increasingly frustrated with the NLD Uncles' refusal to come forward with a public stance and provide guidance to the pro-democracy movement and the Burmese people.

13. (C) NLD spokesman U Nyan Win told us the Uncles have been pushed hard by the MPs-elect and the NLD Youth to take a public stand on the referendum. He continued to insist that the Uncles had decided to vote "No", and were working on

details and procedures of how to disseminate their instructions. Nyan Win believed the procedures would be announced no later than the end of March. He added that, given current tensions within the opposition, the referendum could be the NLD's last battle. The NLD would lose all credibility among the Burmese if it could not lead the public at such a critical moment, he opined.

MON STATE

14. (C) Major Nai Htar Wara of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) told poloff that the party's leadership supported a "no" vote rather than a boycott and have privately urged its members to reject the regime's constitution in the May referendum. He said the NMSP planned to issue a public statement calling on the Mon people to reject the charter "when the time is right" but would not elaborate on when that might be. He commented that most people in Mon State did not understand the referendum or what was at stake, so might not participate as a result. Nonetheless, Nai Htar Wara was confident that if properly educated, the people would want to vote "no." Despite this, he acknowledged that NMSP had done little to promote an awareness of the issues at stake and did not have a well-developed plan to do so.

15. (C) Nai Htar Wara reported that earlier this month, NMSP officials met with the Burma Army's regional commander to discuss the referendum. The commander asked to meet with party leaders to urge them to support the referendum and passage of the constitution. Nai Htar Wara described the meeting as civil but stressed that the NMSP did not agree to support the regime's constitution. He also pointed out that so far, the regime has not used heavy-handed tactics in Mon State to promote its constitution, relying instead on the issuance of temporary registration cards to encourage people

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to vote "yes."

CHIN STATE

16. (C) Zomi National Congress Joint Secretary Khan Lyan informed us that a coalition of Chin ethnic groups have decided to support a boycott of the referendum. However, the alliance of the Zomi National Congress, Zomi Revolutionary Army, and Chin National Front have not issued any public statements calling on the Chin people to boycott and have not yet discussed any plans to do so. Khan Lyan claimed that Chin insurgents planned to attack polling places in rebel "strongholds" near the Indian border, but acknowledged the insurgency's relative weakness made this unlikely.

KACHIN STATE

17. (C) Kachin ethnic negotiator Dr. Saboi Jum told us key Kachin groups were waiting to see the draft constitution before formally taking a position on the referendum. However, he relayed that most leaders he had spoken with were increasingly pessimistic that the regime had taken their concerns into account in drafting the charter. Members of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Kachin Defense Army (KDA), and New Democratic Army Kachin (NDAK) met in February to discuss the referendum. Saboi Jum said leaders of these groups agreed to consult with one another and speak with one voice on matters concerning the referendum and roadmap. He relayed their concern that the cease-fire could be at risk if the referendum approves a constitution that did not address Kachin concerns. However, he believed the risk of renewed violence this year was low and said key Kachin cease-fire leaders would deliberate more before deciding on a course of action.

RAKHINE STATE/ROHINGYA COMMUNITY

18. (C) Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) Joint Secretary Aye Thar Aung personally supported a boycott of the referendum but said the ALD would likely support whatever public position the NLD eventually takes. Aye Thar Aung has been critical of the NLD's failure to take a stand on the referendum. People are waiting to hear what the NLD will do, he told us, and the NLD leadership has a responsibility to advise people whether to boycott or participate in the May vote. He reiterated these sentiments in a March 19 interview with Mizzima News. However, despite reports in the same Mizzima article that the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) has called for a boycott, Aye Thar Aung, a CRPP member, reported that that group of MP's-elect has not met in more than six months, and stressed its members have not reached a consensus on the referendum.

19. (C) Our contacts in the Rohingya community informed Poloff that most of the ethnic Muslim population in Northern Rakhine State remained opposed to anything the regime supports. Given the choice, ethnic Rohingya would almost certainly vote against the constitution. However, Rohingya activist and historian Myo Thant and former political prisoner Kyaw Soe Aung were skeptical the regime would permit the perennially disenfranchised Rohingya population to participate in the referendum. Additionally, they said they did not know of any organized campaign in the Rohingya community to either boycott the referendum or vote "no."

88 Generation

110. (C) In contrast to the dueling and disorganized ethnic and pro-democracy groups, 88 Generation, headed by Toe Kyaw Hlaing, appears to be focused and ploughing forward with their vote "No" campaign. Toe Kyaw Hlaing operates in close consultation with 88 Generation and NLD Youth leaders in hiding, including Nilar Thein, Soe Tun, Tun Myint Aung, and

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Phyu Phyu Thin. Toe Kyaw Hlaing is moving forward with the vote "No" campaign he described to us in Reftel. Pol/econ chief met him March 19 after he had just returned from a trip to upper Burma. During the trip, Toe Kyaw Hlaing met with most of the chief abbots in Mandalay's monasteries. He requested that, at the end of the upcoming annual Monk examinations, in which Monks from all-over Burma gather at Mandalay's monasteries, the abbots gather the students together and instruct them to go back to their local monasteries to educate their patrons on why the regime's proposed constitution would not bring democracy to Burma. Toe Kyaw Hlaing said most of the abbots agreed. Additionally, 88 Generation has just found a government-run factory with a sympathetic manager who agreed to print 10,000 t-shirts and 30,000 stickers for their vote "No" campaign.

111. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing is organizing NLD Youth members, who are frustrated with the NLD's inaction, to campaign discreetly in universities. The "92 MPs-elect", who broke with the CRPP and NLD last year when they appealed to Ban Ki Moon to form the 1990 Parliament under UN protection, have also begun to participate in 88 Generation's vote "No" campaign.

112. (C) Asked if the recent arrests of key Generation Wave and AFSBU members had hurt his vote "No" campaign, Toe Kyaw Hlaing responded that the arrests did come as a blow and that he feared more were to come. Despite this setback, Toe Kyaw Hlaing insisted 88 Generation's campaign continued and he has even prepared lower-level members to continue the campaign in case he was arrested. Toe Kyaw Hlaing added that some monks and pro-democracy activists in Rangoon and Mandalay want to hold peaceful demonstrations during the April Water Festival, but he did not know how strong any turnout would be. For the time being, he told us, no coordinated plan had the monks

taking to the streets again.

Private Efforts

¶13. (C) We also have heard of personal vote "No" campaigns organized by individuals, who usually keep their distance from political issues. A journalist told us of her efforts to educate friends, family members, and people she meets during her travels around the country of their right as citizens to vote yes or no. She had also informed them that she planned to vote no, although she also would talk to lawyers to determine whether refusing to vote could effectively serve as a no vote, since she understood that the law required a majority of eligible voters to vote in favor, not just a majority of those voting. She also urged her friends and relatives to volunteer as independent poll watchers to observe the counting. She expressed regret that her efforts would not reach more than a few hundred people, and doubted that the 70% of the population living in rural areas would be reached by the various vote "No" campaigns underway. She urged Charge to promote constitutional educational programming on DVB and RFA, which had wide listenership including in rural areas. She found most people had very little idea of the significance of the constitution and its potential impact on their lives. The only way for the Burmese public to obtain accurate and objective information about the proposed constitution, she argued, was via the short-wave broadcasters.

The Regime

¶14. (C) Surprisingly, the regime also appears disorganized in their efforts to encourage the Burmese to approve the constitution. Although the regime's mouthpiece daily, The New Light of Myanmar, carries an editorial each day instructing why the constitution should be approved, there appears to be little organized effort to mobilize a vote "Yes" vote throughout the country. Campaigning appears to be haphazard, and USDA does not appear to be taking a dominant roll, although there are scattered reports of some USDA

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officials visiting local residents to urge them to approve the constitution. One Embassy contact reported that neighborhood officials visited his home to update the registration in preparation for the referendum. When he asked what the referendum was for, they replied they did not know. An Agriculture Ministry official in Nay Pyi Taw told the Israeli Ambassador that all Ministry officials had received copies of the proposed constitution, and were told to read and study it. However, the official, presumably well-educated, admitted she did not understand the constitution.

¶15. (C) Embassy Small Grantee, Professor Kyaw Zaw Naing, conducts street law clinics throughout Burma, and just returned from Shan State where he spoke with schoolteachers, merchants, and villagers throughout Eastern Shan State about the proposed constitution and upcoming referendum. He told poloffs that while there is significant curiosity about the upcoming referendum, few people understand the significance or processes of the referendum. He observed no coordinated efforts on behalf of the government or the opposition to educate or prepare citizens for the referendum. While the local government was registering voters for the referendum, many were not aware why they were even being registered. He saw no coordinated government campaign to advocate the constitution's approval. While he expected some Shan civic organizations would attempt to educate citizens in Shan State on the constitution and the referendum, so far none had begun to do so. He estimated that only 7-10 percent of Eastern Shan State residents were literate in Burmese, and would not even be able to read the ballot.

¶16. (C) Comment: Although the pro-democracy opposition universally opposes the regime's draft constitution, they show little capacity to mount a coordinated and wide-spread campaign against it. It is disappointing that at such a crucial juncture for Burma's future, the opposition and the ethnic nationalities cannot overcome their differences to defeat a common enemy. With the exception of 88 Generation, which has long anticipated and planned for a vote "No" campaign, other pro-democracy groups are waiting for the NLD to take the lead, which the Uncles are clearly reluctant to do. In the absence of the draft constitution, and any coordinated, public education, many Burmese remain confused as to whether or how to vote. For that reason, we agree that a concerted public information campaign by DVB and RFA would be very important in educating the Burmese public about the proposed constitution and their right to vote according to their own personal opinion. End comment.
VILLAROSA